

PRELIMINARY OSINT ANALYSIS OF THE "FREEDOM CONVOY 2022"

KEY POINTS

The "Freedom Convoy" protest and occupation is not an unprecedented event. Severe economic or societal stresses amplified by rapid technological change deepen societal alienation and provide breeding grounds for civil unrest and social polarization. However, the convergence of several elements make this protest/occupation somewhat more sophisticated and unique: the use of social media for organizing and communicating both internally and externally, the use of misinformation and disinformation to promote certain narratives, the use of crowdfunding and cryptocurrencies, blockade tactics and logistics, the virulence of discourse towards government and elected officials, appropriation of national symbols, international support and recognition, knowledge of police enforcement tactics, and disruption in multiple Canadian cities and border crossings.

The overwhelming majority of protesters around the "Freedom Convoy" have denounced violence and are not directly aligned to or members of any specific group or ideology. There is clearly a wide range of participants from the ideologically motivated, the disenfranchised, people just fed up with the pandemic and protest tourists. While the initial and nominal rallying cry for protesters was around vaccine mandates and public health measures, there is a general distrust of government institutions, perceptions of excessive government control and an anti-elite sentiment. Adherence to conspiracy narratives is also prominent.

The movement is also attracting individuals who hold ideologically motivated violent extremist (IMVE) beliefs and may feel emboldened in their views amid the movement's perceived popularity. Xenophobic and neo-Nazi flags were on display at a number of events, as well as the symbols and some adherents known to be associated with alt-right movements, Diagonol, Canada First, Kingdom of Canada and the Three Percenters.

It is unlikely that premeditated violence will take place, however, some individuals "lone actors" or small groups motivated by an anti-government/militia worldview could be willing to engage in serious violence to further their objectives. The seizure of a cache of weapons in Alberta indicates a willingness to use violence. A 'lone actor' attack remains the most likely use of violence. Non-empirical analysis of social media suggests heightened risks for government and elected officials.

It is highly unlikely that there is centralized leadership exerting clear and consistent command and control across the whole protest movement. Nonetheless, several individuals have presented themselves as core spokespeople and seem to exert some level of control. Many of these core spokespeople/organizers are connected to extremist views, have used threats, and have previous connections with the 2019 United We Roll campaign. Previous protests in the Canada and the U.S. have seen populists, alt-right groups, white supremacists, conspiracy advocates etc. prove adept at infiltrating, co-opting, or even taking over grievance-based protests. The risk being that movements are used wittingly or unwittingly as "Trojan Horses" for political agendas that undermine or attack government institutions, the rule of law, and human rights.

The "Freedom Convoy" has received significant international financial support and publicity. According to open source information, the bulk of financial flows to the "Freedom Convoy" are small amounts (e.g., C\$100 or less). According to unverified leaked information from Give Send Go, from 2-10 February, almost 56% of total transactions (comprising less than C\$4 million), came from the USA. Canadians donated more money, however (C\$4.3 million). Financial support has likely reinforced the protesters' resolve. Engagement and activity continues to come from US online communities, driven by key US influencers, alternative media and political actors.

The "Freedom Convoy" itself or new entities that emerge from it are likely to continue for several weeks and will seek new opportunities to protest, occupy and disrupt. It may also embolden other groups and individual movements across the ideological spectrum. There are also risks that the protests may serve to deepen and harden new and existing cleavages within Canadian society. As the protests persist, these feelings may become more entrenched and form the basis for longer-term societal schisms.